

Should I stay or should I go? The quandary for Black-African International students studying in the UK.

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Abstract

This chapter explores the experiences of Black African international students in higher education in the UK and examines the dilemmas they face as they decide whether to go abroad to study, and whether to stay once they arrive. Black-African international students face a number of particular challenges in embarking on the decision to study abroad, including financial pressures and the uncertain process of obtaining student visas, and they also frequently experience isolation and discrimination once they arrive at their host institutions. These challenges affect their subsequent ability to adjust to life abroad. In order to cope with the difficulties they may face, Black-African students utilise a range of coping mechanisms, including a preference for support from co-nationals, other Africans and religious organisations, rather than assistance from university services.

Keywords: adjustment, international students, migration, Black-African students, isolation, higher education

Introduction

There are around 34,000 African students currently attending Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK, and a similar number of African students study in the US (HESA, 2017; IIE 2017). In the UK around 40% of African students are from Nigeria, which is the fourth most common country of domicile for international students in the UK, after China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and India (HESA, 2017). In the 2014-15 academic year, 9494 students from Nigeria were enrolled in US universities, compared with 14790 in the UK (IIE 2017; HESA 2017). Despite making up a significant part of the international student body, African students are an understudied group and are rarely referred to in the literature on international students.

Previous work has shown that African students and Black-African students in particular, face a number of specific challenges when studying abroad. One recurring theme is the significant financial pressures faced by many Black-African students, as only a small minority of students receive scholarships or institutional sponsorship (Blake, 2006; Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe and Caldwell 2014). Another important issue is the fact that Black-African students report greater amounts of prejudice and discrimination than some other groups of international students (Lee and Opio 2011). Both these issues can create a sense of intense isolation that can have serious consequences for students' ability to integrate, or concentrate on their studies, and can result in a wish to return to their countries of origin. Furthermore, research on student counseling has found that Black-African students rarely access these services, and often do not consider them to be a culturally appropriate response to their problems (Warren and Constantine 2007).

The majority of research on international students focuses on issues of adjustment once students arrive at their host institutions. However, much less is known about the journeys that students undergo to arrive in the first place, and the subsequent impact this has on their process of adapting to life abroad. As such, there is much scope for exploring these areas to understand in greater detail the experiences and lives of students that come to pursue their studies in the West. It is the aim of the current research to shed light on the experiences of Black-African students in terms of the process they went through in deciding to leave their home countries, as well as their journeys abroad and their experiences of learning to cope in a new culture.

The data presented in this chapter stem from a decade of research on Black-African students studying at UK universities, and were collected during a number of research projects exploring their experiences of migrating to, and living in, the UK (see Caldwell and Hyams-Ssekasi 2016; Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe and Caldwell 2014; Hyams-Ssekasi 2012). Grounded theory was used to inform the research design, research questions and sampling strategy in each of these projects and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students about their pertinent experiences (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). In total, interviews were conducted with 108 students from 13 different sub-Saharan African countries, studying at 3 UK universities. This chapter discusses previously unpublished primary data from these studies, in conjunction with relevant secondary literature. The chapter is divided into three main sections: motivations for studying abroad, encounters whilst travelling, and experiences of living in the UK.

Motivations for studying abroad: Push and Pull factors

Throughout the discussion that follows, previously unpublished primary data from our studies, in the form of quotes from students, will be discussed in light of the existing literature. Previous research on international students has elucidated various factors which influence international students' choices to study in Western countries, such as increased social and economic status from studying abroad, limited educational opportunities at home and the perception that other countries have better quality education systems (Pimpa, 2003 p.179). A number of authors have noted that local qualifications are often considered to hold less prestige than international ones (Maringe and Carter, 2007) and that for some students obtaining an overseas qualification becomes something of an obsession (Barker 1997). In our studies, students explained that foreign qualifications are "more valued" [Student 19, Ghana] and "more respected over local ones" [Student 36, Nigeria], and a person with a degree from abroad is considered "an international asset" [Student 50, Cameroon] and an "important person" [Student 40, Kenya].

A number of authors have viewed the mobility of international students as being motivated by a combination of push and pull factors (Altbach 1998; Mazzorl and Soutar 2002; Li and Bray 2007). Push factors operate within a source country and are circumstances which mean that staying in the home country to study is not possible or more challenging than travelling abroad (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Such push factors include a lack of educational opportunities in the student's home country (Tierney and Auerbach 2005), as well as political instability (Maringe and Carter 2007) or discrimination against minorities (Altbach, Kelly, and Lulat 1985). In contrast, pull factors operate to make a particular country attractive to students wishing to study abroad. Pull factors may be based on the political, economic and cultural links between home and host countries (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002), as well as the choice of courses available and "big libraries, acres of computers, and ultra-equipped labs" (Ketaku 2007, 4).

As Ketaku (2007, 2) describes, “the ‘push’ factor is a strong current running throughout Africa”. Many Black-African students choose to study abroad due to a lack of facilities and opportunities at home as well as disruptions to their education due to political upheaval, underfunding, corruption and overcrowding (Maringe and Carter 2007; Ketaku 2007). These themes were reflected in the experiences of our students, who mentioned strikes and a lack of resources and university places as reasons why they chose to study abroad rather than in their own country:

The Universities back home lack the necessary resources such as books, computers, proper labs and some of the tutors do not have the relevant experiences of teaching students at a higher level. [Student 13, Sudan]

Universities in Zambia can close due to student disruption once or twice in a year hence lengthening the period that one spends there. [Student 4, Zambia]

I am from Zambia but my parents work in Botswana. In Botswana, they have only one University and they could not take all of us who had finished our sixth form and that is why I decided to come here to undertake my higher education studies. [Student 6, Zambia]

A number of our students also mentioned political upheaval, persecution and civil war as reasons for leaving their country and continuing their education in the UK. As one student explains: “My country is at war. People are involved in killing, abducting and stealing people’s property... Life became so difficult that I had to leave the most affected area. I guess this added to my decision to come to the UK to study” [Student 25, Uganda].

Choosing the UK

In addition to the strong “push” to leave their home countries in order to study abroad, our students often had felt a strong “pull” towards the UK, as their preferred destination. Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003, 320) point out that British education enjoys “the branding of ‘made’ in the United Kingdom”, and as such is a popular choice among African students. Previous studies have argued that students “tend to migrate to their former colonial masters perhaps largely because of the derived cultural capital and language facility” (Maringe and Carter 2007, 461). This was a theme that ran through many of our students’ explanations of why they chose the UK, rather than other countries as and they felt that British culture and education would be familiar to them to some degree:

I chose the UK because the educational system back home is run in line with the British system of education. [Student 27, Nigeria]

Because my country Zambia is an English speaking nation and I can relate to the English way of life... I thought ... I would fit in properly, because the standards are more or less the same and ethics and everything. [Student 4, Zambia]

I wanted to come to the UK because of its colonial background and also a lingua franca is English and I felt I would be more fluent and at least comprehend more, compared to other countries. [Student 7, Gambia]

Another important factor in deciding where to study was the influence of parents and other family members. Many of our students mentioned having family members who were living in the UK or who had studied there. These relatives advised on the choice of institution and application processes, but also provided inspiration: “My maternal grandfather did his post graduate education in Leeds, so when I was about 17 and I was cleaning his office I saw one of his theses from Leeds University and I always remembered that” [Student 23, Ghana].

For many Black-African students, the decision to study abroad does not rest entirely with the individual, but parents, extended families and the community as a whole may have a say in whether a young person can go abroad (Caldwell and Hyams- Ssekasi 2016). This is in part due to the fact that it is not only the individual student who benefits from being associated with international education, but that the enhanced reputation is extended to the whole family. A student in Maringe and Carter's (2007, 468) study mentioned that their father became "quite influential" because his son had studied in the UK. A student in our study described his period of study in the UK as a "blessing not only for me but for my family at large" [Student 40, Kenya]. As such, parents exert a strong influence over where children will go to study. One student told us: "The truth is that I never liked England and never had the interest to come and study here; it was my father who forced me to come, instead of going to America" [Student 27, Nigeria]. Another Nigerian student we interviewed explains why this might have been the case: "There is a belief in my country that a UK degree is better than an American degree because the British are serious minded and the Americans are more social and fun seekers" [Student 29, Nigeria].

Students in our study also explained that sending family members to study abroad is an indicator of status and wealth: "My family is considered wealthy enough compared to other families in the village because all my brothers and sisters were offered a better education and opportunities to study abroad" [Students 6, Zambia]. However, for some families, sending sons and daughters to study abroad was considered more of a necessity than a luxury. Whilst previous studies have found strong political and economic push factors for African students to study abroad (see Maringe and Carter 2007, Ketaku 2007), our data also reveal a significant economic pull factor towards the UK in particular. A number of our students mentioned that their families regarded the UK student visa rules, which allow

students to work whilst studying and for up to 2 years after graduation, as an opportunity to supplement family incomes and that this was a strong motivator for families to send children to study in the UK:

My country is very poor, people have no jobs. They [parents] wanted me to come here so that I can both study and work. They expect me to send money at least every month. [Student 18, Ghana]

I need the degree but also the money. If I do not send money to my family, they will starve to death. [Student 22, South Africa]

My brother ... paid some of my fees but he is expecting me to do some work and send something [money] to him so that he can look after the business. [Student 20, Ghana]

Families are often involved in contributing to the fees for Black-African students and being self sponsored is more common than receiving scholarships or being sponsored by governments or other agencies (Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe and Caldwell 2014). There are a number of reports of Black-African students borrowing large sums of money from relatives and friends or selling family property to fund their studies (Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe and Caldwell 2014; NUS 2014). Many of our students also mentioned this:

My cousin and friends put some aside for me and paid half of my fees. I know I owe lots of money which my people are expecting soon. [Student 19, Ghana]

I wanted to come to study here in the UK but I did not have sufficient money for both fees and upkeep, so I borrowed money from an uncle who is expecting to be repaid as soon as I finish my course. [Student 2, Zambia]

The need to earn money to send back home to support families or to repay loans adds a significant pressure onto these students whilst they are in the UK, and financial worries are a significant theme in much of our work with Black-African students (Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe and Caldwell 2014). Jobs are not as easy to come by as was believed back home and those that are available are low waged (NUS 2014; Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe and Caldwell 2014). As one of our students explains: “When they [people in the student’s local area] talk about the money one can make when they come to the UK, one would think it ‘grows on trees’, but the reality is that it is those jobs that most people hate [and] that one has to work long hard hours” [Student 48, Zimbabwe].

Challenges and uncertainty whilst travelling abroad

Leaving home to come and study in the West is not taken for granted. To many Black-African students, travelling abroad for the first time can create uncertainty and an overwhelming fear of the unknown but also joy, excitement and long lasting memories. In a similar vein, there is also a perception of divine intervention in studying abroad. As one student we interviewed explained: “To come to the UK is considered to be a blessing from God because many people want to come here but they face so many stumbling blocks in the process” [Student 35, Nigeria].

As Ketaku (2007, 8) points out, “visa issuance rates in Africa have always been among the lowest in the world” and over the course of our work with the experiences of Black-African students studying in the UK, we have been given many accounts of the difficulties, uncertainties and unpleasant experiences which are involved in preparing to leave and

travelling abroad. However, we have been unable to find any mention of this stage of the process in other academic studies of Black-African students, including in those studies which specifically focus on motivations to study abroad (Maringe and Carter 2007) or pre-migratory attitudes (Fischer 2011). Not only have the students we interviewed explained the emotional complexities of leaving their families and communities (Caldwell and Hyams-Ssekasi 2016), our work has also revealed the challenges students face in producing adequate documentation for visa applications in a continent where births are frequently undocumented and bank accounts are only held by a third of the population (Unicef 2017; Business Insider 2017). Again, the challenge of providing proof of adequate finances is a key theme in the students' narratives of obtaining visas (Caldwell and Hyams-Ssekasi 2016).

Another strong theme in migratory experiences of Black-African students is their experiences of actually travelling abroad. For some, their lack of experience of international travel caused anxiety and embarrassment:

I did not know about the departure fee. I did not even have the money to pay. This caused me so much stress because even my father who had escorted me did not have any money on him. I had to dig for money I had sealed and hid to pay for my tuition fee. I almost missed my flight. [Student 6, Zambia]

Before I left my country, a friend advised me to keep all other documents secure in my suitcase except the passport, admission letter and flight tickets, which I did. On arrival at the UK passport control, the officer who checked my passport asked for additional documents... When I told him that there were in my suitcase ... he made me look stupid in front of all other passengers. [Student, 18, Ghana]

A number of students mentioned unpleasant experiences with immigration and customs procedures which left them with emotional and psychological scars. Many students

felt they were viewed with suspicion and felt as though they had done something wrong, particularly after being subjected to lengthy periods of questioning by immigration officials. These immigration interviews were experienced by a number of our students, and one explained: “Most of the people that I know have had negative experiences at the hands of the immigration authorities. We definitely are not VIPs!” [Student 4, Zambia]. Again, students mentioned that they were not aware that they might be questioned on arrival in the UK, and a number of them felt that this was unwarranted after the arduous process of obtaining a student visa in the first place:

When I got my UK visa after being rejected three times, I was convinced that everything would be ok.... Nobody told me back home that I would be scrutinised at the UK airport. In actual fact, I was asked so many questions and my documents were scrutinised by customs officers at the airport that I felt angry and at some point, I thought: ‘Why do they not just send me back home?’ [Student 31, Nigeria]

For other students, the routine practices of separating passengers from different regions, or random customs checks on luggage provoked negative feelings and anxiety. One student describes her feelings as her bags were searched by customs officials during a routine check:

As I proudly pulled my suitcase away heading for the way out, I was stopped by a lady in uniform ... My belongings were lifted out of the suitcase, shook and placed aside attracting the attention of passer bys. I was panicking, sweating and embarrassed. 'What crime have I committed?' I finally asked. 'No crime', she answered casually. [Student 5, Zambia]

These experiences were often then compounded by the fact that the delays in security and immigration processes caused them to miss their transport to their universities. This left them “confused, disturbed and angry” [Student 49, Angola] and “hungry, angry and afraid...

Right away I had a strong instinct: I want to fly back home” [Student 5, Zambia]. Another student explains he was “perturbed because I had not the slightest idea where I was going and how to catch any other means of transport: It was a painful day, an experience I will never forget” [Student, 13, Sudan]. In contrast, students who were greeted at the airport by representatives from the university felt welcomed and proud of themselves for finally reaching the end of their journey. One student even became friends with the person who met her at the airport: “I was so excited when I saw this lady with my name on a card. I gave her a hug. We have since been friends” [Student 48, Zimbabwe].

Reality bites – the challenges of living and studying abroad

Much of the previous research on Black-African students has tended to focus on their experiences of adjustment to studying in Western universities (Fischer 2011; Warren and Constantine 2007; Irungu 2013; Blake 2006; Mwara 2008; Boafo-Arthur 2014; Constantine, Ozaki, and Utsey 2004). Research has shown a number of issues that are particularly acute for Black-African students studying in the UK, including significant financial concerns and social isolation (Blake 2006, Maringe and Carter 2007; Irungu 2013; Boafo-Arthur 2014). However, as the majority of Black-African students studying in the UK have previously studied in English-medium education, English language proficiency is not a major issue (Blake 2006). Although Black-African students face greater amounts of prejudice and discrimination than other groups of international students, studies have shown that Black-African studying in the UK do not report as many concerns about prejudice and discrimination, as those who study in the USA (Lee and Opio 2011; Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe and Caldwell 2014).

For many Black-African students there is a significant period of culture shock whilst they adjust to their host country and institution. In particular, previous studies have found that Black-African students are aware they will be a period of adaptation, but many do not realise the scale of adjustment that they will face (Fischer 2011; Irungu 2013; Lee and Opio 2011, Mwara 2008). For some students the difficulties in adapting to their life abroad affects their ability to study and can also lead to a decline in mental and physical health. Whilst international students from all over the world experience culture shock, Black-African students often feel particularly isolated, due to the smaller numbers of students from individual African countries, a large difference between their home culture and that of the host, and a general lack of information about what living abroad might entail. For example, a number of students we interviewed mentioned they had not been aware that student accommodation in the UK is generally self-catering and bedding is not provided:

I have never cooked and going to buy the food stuff was one of the most challenging experiences encountered living in halls of residence. [Student 16, Ghana]

My room was extremely cold and I didn't figure out the place of the heating system.

There was no blanket, no bed sheets nor duvet on the bed. [Student 9, Gambia]

Many students also found the "horrible cold weather" [Student 24, Congo] in Britain more difficult to adapt to than they expected. One student mentioned that the cold made them physically sick and another said: "I did not imagine a country like Britain to be very cold" [Student 31, Nigeria]. The students spoke of needing a lot more information about what to expect before they arrived, as well as practical help in navigating bureaucratic procedures and orientation to the local area. They also mentioned asking about religious organisations on campus but finding that no one knew where they were. Other students mentioned feeling pressurised into signing contracts for accommodation that were too expensive as they were

exhausted from many hours of travelling, and did not know what alternatives were available locally.

Aside from the physical difficulties of eating and keeping warm and finding suitable accommodation, a major theme in our students' initial experiences is one of isolation and loneliness. The students talked of trying to make friends in the first few weeks, but finding themselves unable to forge lasting friendships: "The first few weeks I felt isolated. I am older than most students and a lot of them already seemed to know each other from School or Colleges, but you don't know anyone yet, and nobody tries to make friends" [Student 17, Ghana]. A number of students also arrived late, after the orientation activities that typically occur in the first week and as such felt that by the time they arrived, friendship groups had already become established:

I have been here for the last three weeks and I seem to be the only one who has not managed to find a close friend. I guess because I came late and everyone had already established some kind of relationship. I think I will always be on my own. To tell you the truth it is a hard life studying here in the university where you have no friends or college mates. [Student 48, Zimbabwe]

The lack of friends left students feeling confused, angry and depressed as they "stood alone in a crowd ... looking foolish" [Student 7, Gambia], and many students talked of having no social life at all, so that they ended up "getting 'married' to books and becoming a book worm" [Student 45, Zimbabwe].

These initial experiences left some students at unexpected crossroads wanting to go home: "If I had enough money to fly back home, I would have gone back. It took me at least a few weeks to get myself back up. It's like nobody wanted me or was willing to help me"

[Student 36, Nigeria]. As this quote shows, many students felt there is no one at the university who can help them with either their practical problems or the feelings of isolation. This is despite the existence of international student support services and university counseling services. Many of the students we spoke to either did not know about these services in the crucial early days, or did not find them a suitable substitute for the supportive and familiar communities they had left behind. Instead many students spend considerable amounts of money phoning friends and family “to speak to someone who would understand me” [Student 34, Nigeria].

However, other students were reticent about admitting their problems to their families, for fear of admitting defeat: “I felt homesick but did not phone my parents because they would have paid for my flight back home and I did not want to give up the course after the first month. I did not want to go home as a failure” [Student 22, South Africa]. This theme of not disclosing personal problems is common in many of the narratives we heard from students, and has been noted by a number of authors (Constantine, Okazaki, and Utsey 2004; Lee and Opio 2011; Irungu 2013). A number of students mentioned a culture of forbearance back home, where people are expected not to complain about difficulties (Constantine et al. 2004). Moreover, many of our students did not want to discuss problems with institutional representatives, teachers or new British friends, as they felt this would contribute to a feeling they already had of being perceived as inferior to British students.

For many students, the turning point in their adjustment experiences was meeting co-nationals, from whom they could start to build support networks. A number of students commented that these friends were pivotal in their decision to stay in the UK and carry on with their studies. “If I had come here and did not meet any Nigerian I would have gone back, I would not have stayed [Student 30, Nigeria]. Not all students were able to make connections with co-nationals, and instead these students created networks of other Africans

(Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe and Caldwell 2014). One student explained “I have not met anybody from my country which makes me feel sad. No friends as such. However, I have availed myself to other African students in order to have someone to talk to” [Student 50, Cameroon]. These pan-African friendship groups were also able to provide support and advice to each other, and for one of our students enabled him to see the benefits of staying on to finish his studies: “When I first got here I wanted to change my decision, so I needed more advice. I was very confused and went to T (African friend) and I changed my mind about British Education” [Student 49, Angola].

One interesting aspect of developing support networks that we identified in our interviews was that many students actively sought out religious groups on arrival in the UK. For many Black-African students, religion serves both as source of inner strength and comfort through prayer and as a way to meet people with similar values and culture. This echoes the situation found with some other groups of migrants, who find that practising their religion in the host country acts as a reminder of home, as well as a way to build social ties (Ciobanu and Fokkema 2017). When asked how they deal with personal problems, students in our study commented that they “turn to God” [Student 65, Nigeria] and would also “speak to somebody from my Church” [Student 89, Zambia], in preference to speaking to someone at the university.

When asked how they could have been better supported as they adapted to life at their new university the students frequently mentioned a lack of representation. Wilton and Constantine (2004) found that students were more likely to feel homesick and consider leaving university if they perceived that their ethnicity was under-represented in main university services such as the library and students’ union. Our students mentioned that that they did not see any Black staff at the help desks and that they felt that “no one seems to

care” [Student 48, Zimbabwe] and “nobody was ready to listen or discuss my problem” [Student 49, Angola]. One student explained the problem as follows:

I think the problem is that the universities just feel that since there are other community groups like the Muslims and Caribbean, they think that all foreign students are represented... I admit the library staff are excellent but there no Black staff there to represent us. [Student 44, Zimbabwe]

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the findings from our studies on the experiences of Black-African international students studying in the UK. Whilst students choose to study abroad for a variety of reasons, some find themselves standing in crossroads of whether to stay or to go back home. Notably it appears that factors such as a lack of resources for higher education and political instability are drivers for students to consider continuing their studies abroad. Many students from Anglophone African countries are also attracted to the UK due to a perceived familiarity with the British education system and culture. However, for those that do choose to apply, there lies ahead a lengthy, expensive and uncertain journey to undertake in order to arrive at their chosen host institution. A lack of information about visa application procedures and international travel exacerbates the feelings of anxiety of such a journey. It is clear that host institutions could do more to help students understand these processes and become more aware of what to expect during this phase. This would facilitate students being able to arrive on time and thus benefit from welcome and orientation events that many universities provide for their new international students.

Once they have arrived at their host institution, Black-African students frequently report finding it hard to make meaningful social connections within the university, which

produces feelings of isolation and loneliness. Some students turn to family and friends, whilst others draw on their religious faiths, both for solace and a source of new friends. However in both cases, students find ways to survive without accessing the institutional support services designed to help them.

Recommendations

It is clear that universities can do more to ensure that their services reach those students who are in need of them, in a culturally appropriate manner. Black-African students in UK universities often feel under-represented and as such feel that university staff do not understand them or their needs. Universities could do more to facilitate Black-African students to build social support networks, such as between co-nationals and other African students. Universities could also facilitate the building of groups on social networks of both existing students and successful applicants so that they can exchange experiences and advice about travelling to the UK, to help avoid some of the unpleasant experiences that many students reported from their journeys. Furthermore, it seems that universities have rarely acknowledged the role of religious groups as a source of friendships and support for religious students, and more could be done to help international students find suitable faith communities whilst studying abroad. It is hoped that these findings will enable educators to consider their institutions from the perspective of Black-African students so that they may design more culturally inclusive learning experiences.

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